Art beyond Borders

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The writer and essayist Lu Xun made a lasting mark on what Tang Xiaobing calls “the origins of the Chinese avant-garde.” Lu Xun (1881–1936) was able to formalize the aesthetic criteria and judgments that would connect one part of Chinese art to social activism. On a formal level, the much darker vision to which he wanted to give impetus brought about in him a determined interest in engraving. In Lu Xun’s career and writing on art, the German artist Käthe Kollwitz occupied an absolutely crucial

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position. Lu Xun literally imposed Kollwitz onto the history of Chinese modernity. Following the death of Lu Xun in 1936, Kollwitz remained a key point of reference. After the creation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949—which ushered in a radical transformation of artistic teaching and the issues attributed to art—the work of Käthe Kollwitz continued to be cited as an example.

We will analyze firstly the international scope of Lu Xun’s actions and the way in which his interest in the work of Käthe Kollwitz conveyed the compassionate symbolism it provided. We will then study the way in which the development of knowledge about Soviet realism (sulianzhuyi xianshizhuyi), from 1934 onward, ushered in a period of reflection on revolutionary art that was able to move beyond the feeling that Chinese creativity was in a stalemate (an avant-garde that was not adapted to the tastes of the proletariat and literature criticized for its lack of connection with reality). We will then focus on the 1950s, a period that marked the peak of artistic exchanges between China and the Soviet Union. We will see that in the various sequences of the evolution of Chinese art, Käthe Kollwitz inspired the adherence and the acclaim of the entire artistic community; her art was modeled on the various fashionable discourses, glorifying her dexterity of technique or the inclusion of the class struggle in her creations.

Knowledge of the German artist Käthe Kollwitz in China owes a great deal to the writer and essayist Lu Xun. His internationalist vision inspired him to spread in his country the works of engravers from Germany (Käthe

4 W. Zhang, Lu Xun lun meishu (Beijing: Renmin meishu chu banshe, 1982).
5 Lu Xun, originally from Zhejiang, came from a family of teachers affiliated to the Qing dynasty who suffered from disgrace at the end of their reign. Despite studying medicine during his stay in Japan in 1902, he ended up moving toward literature. On his return from Japan he took up various posts in education (era of the renewal of the institutions by Cai Yunpei) and became involved in the movement of 4 May 1911. He arrived in Shanghai in 1917 and helped to create the League of Left-Wing Writers (Zhongguo zuoyi zuoji lianmeng). The publication in 1918 his first story “Diary of a Madman” (inspired by the work by Gogol of the same name) was an immediate success and made him a major literary figure. Alongside his activities as a translator, teacher, writer, and essayist, he also edited reviews. One of the episodes that marked a break between Lu Xun and the Chinese Communist Party occurred at the end of his life. Following the Japanese invasion, the Chinese Communist Party wanted to establish a united front in accordance with the directives of the Komintern. Under the leadership of Wang Ming and Zhou Yang, who were in charge of the cultural sector, the party officials wanted a united front from the perspective of developing a literature for national defense. Lu Xun and his comrades from the League of Left-Wing Writers—one of whom was Hu Feng—opposed a decision that would lead to ideological uniformity. Following various ploys orchestrated by Zhou Yang—and strongly criticized by Lu Xun—the League of Left-Wing Writers was dissolved. Some of Lu Xun’s disciples were subjected to repression.
Kollwitz, Carl Meffert, etc.), Belgium (Frans Masereel), the United States (William Siegel), Russia (Aleksandr Serafimovich), or Japan (Uchiyama Kakechi). In a manner different to Liu Haisu or Xu Beihong, Lu Xun endeavored to define a popular art form (dazhong yishu) that was in a position to affect the urban proletariat.

Indeed, some of the wood engraving produced in Shanghai in the early 1930s did broach themes such as the world of work (Jiang Feng), protest against the Japanese invasion and bombings of 1937 (Hu Yichuan and Liu Xian), and the crushing burden of agricultural work (Chen Baozhen). The subjects chosen, in phase with the contextual information, found particular resonance in the work of Kollwitz. Two formal aspects in particular caught the attention of the most dedicated artists: the portrayal of the fighting crowd and the focus on expressions of pain.

Engravings from this series (Ein Weberaufstand [Weaver’s revolt]) were presented at an exhibition of German graphic works in June 1932. The Kollwitz series on the peasant revolts then became essential references. An engraved portrait of Lu Xun by Li Yitai, dated 1974 and showing Kollwitz’s Schwarze Anna in the background, proves how integral a part Kollwitz’s works were of the artistic environment at the time. Again, the portrayal of an oppressed crowd forming one single body—galvanized by a feminine presence appearing to orchestrate and accompany the advance through a wave movement—caught the imagination of the advocates of engraving in China.

6 Besides engravers, knowledge of the paintings of Constantin Meunier (1831–1905) is testimony to his interest in militant artistic figures. See Mengtian Huang, Lu Xun yu meishu (Daguang chubanshe, 1972). Being the cosmopolitan spirit he was, Lu Xun also collected Japanese engravings, in particular creative engraving (sosahu hanga). And he did not abandon wood engravings exhibited for the New Year symbolizing prosperity and luck (nianhua), still established in the Chinese countryside. From 1933, Lu Xun was interested in Soviet engravings. He organized exhibitions in empty apartments. On this point, see Tang, Origins of the Avant-Garde.


8 These engravers had been involved in organizing various associations and movements aimed at sharing knowledge and information about wood engraving. The review Modern Age and the Spring Field Painting Society were major distribution bodies. Li Hua endeavored in particular to develop the movement at national level. One of his works is emblematic of this period of struggle: Roar China!: Lu Xun, Masereel et l’avant-garde graphique en Chine, 1919–1949 (Ghent: Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 2009).

What Lu Xun and Käthe Kollwitz had in common was that they never joined the Communist Party. They were nonetheless both linked to its history. The people around Lu Xun were particularly affected by the repression coming down on young partisans of the left. The darkness of this period of purges, followed by the Japanese invasion, led him to take a particular interest in the wood engravings of Käthe Kollwitz. This was because he saw the circulation of her work as a way to universalize the figure of the sacrificial martyr. In September 1931, at the end of the meeting of a group of young left-wing activists, five of them—including the writer Rou Shi—were arrested and summarily executed. To pay tribute to their deaths, Lu Xun printed Das Opfer (The sacrifice) by Kollwitz in the review Beidao (The big bear), run by Ding Li. Taken from the series Krieg (War), Lu Xun chose this harrowing image showing the separation of a mother from her child to symbolize the deaths of these five young militants.

The use of Das Opfer to illustrate the barbarity to which left-wing partisans in China were continually subjected must be seen in parallel with Kollwitz’s 1919 engraving on the death of Karl Liebknecht (Gedenkblatt für Karl Liebknecht), a work whose reproduction was also circulated in Shanghai. Here too, the presence of a mother and her baby, eyes resting on the calm face of the assassinated Spartacist, adds a tragic heaviness to the composition as a whole. There is no escape from this vision of a wall of impassive, inquiring or gloomy faces.

In much of his writing, Lu Xun returned to his fascination for the thematic evolution that drove the artistic career of Käthe Kollwitz. Resistance, maternal love, and death fill the well of empathy with the weak that he perceived in all of her work.

Gathering information about and collecting original engravings also fueled Lu Xun’s interest in Käthe Kollwitz. He acquired works on German engraving through his friend Xu Shiquan. As a student in Germany, he was able to take or send catalogs to him. This is how he had access to the writing of Otto Nagel (1894–1967), another person who was involved in the issue of

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10 On 18 March 1926, two of his students at École normale supérieure were killed during a demonstration against Japanese imperialism.
11 Besides Lu Xun’s actions, the Modern Woodcut Research Society was created to collect funds for the purchase of German works.
revolution in the arts. The other important figure in the discovery of Käthe Kollwitz’s work in China was the American journalist Agnes Smedley, who acted as a go-between for the purchase of original engravings.

Although the two artists never met, Käthe Kollwitz knew of the existence of her Chinese collector through this war correspondent who followed the Eighth Route Army. Agnes Smedley wrote the introduction, translated into Chinese, for a monograph published by Lu Xun and dedicated to Käthe Kollwitz (Käthe Kollwitz’s Prints Florilegium). The work includes a portfolio published by Emil Richter in Dresden in 1930 that he combines with his collection. Two prefaces were published in succession—one by Lu Xun and the other by Agnes Smedley (Käthe Kollwitz—the People’s Artist).

The reception of Soviet realism was to represent for Lu Xun an awareness that the recourse of European art from 1934 to the most avant-garde tendencies had failed. Contrary to Chinese xylography, Lu Xun wanted to see in the development of Soviet engraving (sulan banhua) the expression of the success of a model. Moreover, in several of his written works he returned to the caricatured appearance of prints showing bloodthirsty revolutionaries that was quite far removed from reality. The circulation of Soviet art in China and, more specifically, engraving was a means of becoming aware of the artistic vitality of a nation that, at the time, contrasted with the lackluster nature of Chinese creativity.

Criticism of the formal abstraction of traditional painting was once again used to show the urgency of returning to a more realist treatment that broke with the game of pointless interpretation. Another way of envisaging the evolution of wood engraving in the Soviet Union rested on the variety of styles used to depict the path to socialism. The movements of realism were a

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14 Lu Xun owned sixteen original reproductions signed by the artist.
15 “The woodcut is a form of graphic art long known in China, but it suffered a period of decline, and when five years ago it revived, the techniques were taken from Europe and had no connection with our old Chinese woodcuts. . . . Now this exhibition provides us with many excellent models,” Lu Xun, “Ji sulian banhua zhanlanhui” [The Exhibition of Soviet Graphic Art, 17 February 1936], in Lu Xun, Selected Works, Vol. 4 (Foreign Languages Press, 2003), 253–55 (first edition, 1956).
16 Lu Xun spoke of the vacuity of some Chinese paintings which consisted in using brush strokes that could evoke the shape of an unspecified bird (a falcon or a swallow). Lu Xun preferred realism and truth to this indecisiveness.
laboratory for detecting the influence of social movements at an artistic level and in this sense appeared to be *art in progress*. In this initial reflection concerning revolutionary realism (*geming xianshizhuyi*), Käthe Kollwitz remained a model to follow.

Following the death of Lu Xun in 1936, the members of the various groups affiliated to the circulation of xylography helped to plan, from their base in Yan’an, the constitution of a revolutionary art renouncing, for the time being, the critical legacy left by Lu Xun but maintaining the contribution of humanism and empathy.17 Jiang Feng, Li Hua, Gu Yan, and Li Qun, all of whom held positions of great responsibility after the official birth of the People’s Republic of China, strived to continue referring to the work of Käthe Kollwitz. Before the birth of the People’s Republic of China, reproductions were circulated widely to inspire a spirit of revolt during the Japanese invasion and, henceforth, to echo the battles led by the liberation army. The influence of Käthe Kollwitz is thus perfectly illustrated by the tributes paid following the announcement of her death in 1945 in the *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao*).18

From the early 1950s, the adoption of the Soviet model took a more radical turn. The translations of theoretical texts in the official fine arts review (*Meishu*), the arrival of the renowned artist (Konstantin Maksimov was taken on by the Ministry of Culture in 1955 in China where he taught at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts) and the sending of students in 1953 to the Soviet Union to the Repin Art Academy in Leningrad were the final stage in the adoption of the Soviet model at the level of schools and academies.19 This movement was accompanied by the desire to popularize oil painting.20 Dur-

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17 Situated on the cliffs of the Loess plateau, Yan’an was the main communist base after the retreat of the Soviets from Jiangxi (Zhonghua suweiai gongheguo) in 1934, which triggered the beginning of the Long March. It was also at Yan’an that the first direct attacks against intellectuals occurred. See Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” *Selected Works*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967); D. E. Apter, “Le discours comme pouvoir: Yan’an et la révolution chinoise,” *Cultures & Conflits* 11–14 (Spring 1994). See also Merle Goldman, *China’s Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
ing this new stage, interest in Käthe Kollwitz remained very marked. However, although her humanism and her involvement in the workers’ cause were once again praised, a more technical aspect henceforth illustrated her importance during this formal period of reflection on realism.

Once again, Käthe Kollwitz was called upon to serve as a spearhead at the dawn of a popular aesthetic (minzhong de shenmei) based on the concrete model, veracity and clarity. As a major admirer of Lu Xun, Li Hua was to serve as professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing (zhongyang meishu xueyuan) from the 1950s until his death in 1994. In his teaching, he asked his students to reproduce the works of Kollwitz. The idea launched by Lu Xun in Shanghai to increase awareness of Käthe Kollwitz in order to liberate people’s consciences was henceforth an integral part of the academic teaching structure of communist China.

Not until after the death of Mao in 1976 and the return to power of personalities of artistic life (Jiang Feng, president of the Association of Chinese Artists)—victims of the Cultural Revolution—did a group of amateur artists, the Stars (xingxing), take on responsibility for the legacy of Käthe Kollwitz. The artists’ association the Stars (xingxing huishe), founded in 1978, was considered by a large number of specialists to represent the return of avant-garde practices in China.

This new reference to Käthe Kollwitz, like the standard bearer of a group of artists involved in the broadening of artistic freedom of expression, gave her back her humanist and denunciatory dimension. Although wood engraving in Germany had an exceptional history, far removed from its historic evolution in China, the intrinsically educational and moral virtues of the engravings of Käthe Kollwitz served to reveal an art form in evolution, moving from the avant-garde to the rear guard.